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AUTHOR Sanacore, Joseph
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ABSTRACT

The negative effects of long-term ability grouping has been discussed often in educational literature, and recent research has identified several areas of concern, including a need for more variety in intra-class instructional grouping. Whole language educators are apparently so dissatisfied with the traditional, rigid three-group plan that they may be avoiding most small group patterns. The challenge to whole language teachers is to organize a variety of groups, including Shared Reading, Shared Meetings, Literature Circles, skill groups, and strategy groups. These patterns provide children with flexibility while they prevent the self-fulfilling prophecy of "once a problem reader, always a problem reader." They also complement other ways of organizing instruction, including whole class and individual activities. Unless varied grouping is incorporated into classrooms, the whole language movement may never demonstrate its full potential for helping children grow as readers and writers. (One figure illustrating considerations for organizing whole language instruction is included; 14 references are attached.) (RS)

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Intra-Class Grouping with a Whole Language Thrust

Dr. Joseph Sanacore
Department of Reading,
Language, and Cognition
Hofstra University
Hempstead, NY 11550

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The negative effects of long-term ability grouping have been discussed often in educational literature. Children who are labeled poor readers in the primary grades and who remain in ability groups usually maintain their remedial status through the grades. They not only do poorly in reading but also transfer their poor performance to content area assignments. In addition, they tend to develop low self-concepts, and some even exhibit learned helplessness with its related defeatist attitude.

Recently, Fisher and Hiebert (in press) and Hiebert and Fisher (1990) conducted a study which shed new light on the importance of grouping patterns. These researchers examined literacy tasks in whole language classes and in skills-oriented classes. Although whole language environments were qualitatively and quantitatively more advantageous, the researchers identified several areas of concern. One of these areas reflected a need for more variety in intra-class instructional grouping. Whole language professionals may have been so dissatisfied with the traditional, rigid three group plan, that they focused on either whole class instruction or individual activities. There were virtually no teacher-led or peer-led small groups observed in the whole language classrooms. Hiebert and Fisher (1990) concluded, "Just as overreliance on ability groups created problems in the past, overreliance on whole-class instruction and peer interaction can be expected to provide less than optimal learning environments for students over the long run"(p.63).

These findings as well as common sense support the need for encouraging different grouping strategies in whole language classrooms. The following suggestions are therefore made in the context of complementing teachers' repertoire of grouping formats. These suggestions are not intended to be prescriptive, nor are they meant to preclude whole-class or individual activities. Instead, they can be used with other approaches at appropriate times during the school year.

Shared Reading

Shared Reading reinforces the position that reading is a social activity. As children support one another's efforts during reading and rereading, they increase the chances of helping all peers, especially less fluent readers, to have successful reading experiences. According to Harste, Short, and Burke (1988), "Less proficient readers need to read in an atmosphere that supports their initial reading experiences and encourages them to take risks and to make predictions based on meaning and structure as they read, rather than focusing their attention on isolated aspects of the reading process" (p.346).

Shared Reading can be organized in a variety of ways, including group read together time. (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988). In this arrangement, the teacher introduces the children to a Big Book by focusing on the title and cover illustration. After the children make predictions about the story, the teacher reads it while pointing to the words. As the children identify

predictable sections of the story, the teacher stimulates them to read aloud repeated phrases and sentences. Depending on the stories, the teacher may encourage these young readers to predict coming events or to determine how the story events and illustrations are linked. When the first reading is completed, the children may confirm their predictions, discuss their personal reactions to the story, or focus on other related activities. Afterward, an immediate rereading should take place, and the group should be stimulated to engage in choral reading of predictable words and repetitive parts. If interest is sustained, the children can become involved in a third rereading with more responsibility in choral reading. Then, copies of the book are placed in the library corner for individuals who want to read independently or with a partner and in the listening corner for children who need more reading support. In addition to the group read together time, Harste, Short, and Burke (1988) provide other variations of Shared Reading, including partner reading, popcorn reading, and choral reading.

Sharing Meetings

Similar to Shared Reading is Sharing Meetings which help children realize the importance of social interaction during writing. These group sessions lessen some of the frustrations associated with individual writing while they help children extend control over their texts. Similarly, they support writers in their thrust to retain ownership of their writing (Newman, 1985).

Sharing Meetings are organized by the classroom teacher and include worthwhile activities. For example, a child would explain progress he or she has made in writing and the type of support needed from peers. Then, the writer usually reads aloud the writing sample or a part of it. The individual also would seek comments from listeners who would respond by retelling what they heard or by indicating how much they appreciate the ideas in the writing. Listeners then ask questions or make recommendations about specific aspects of the writer's concerns (Calkins, 1983).

Group experiences such as these help both young and adult writers to develop valuable insights about the importance of collaboration in learning to become a writer. In guiding graduate students to apply aspects of collaboration to their students, Newman (1985) concludes, "It is through engagement with others, by talking about our ideas and problems, by listening to their reactions and suggestions, by experiencing the effect of our writing, by seeing how others were going about solving their writing problems, that we learned how writing could be done" (p. 129).

Literature Circles

Another worthwhile grouping strategy is Literature Circles (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988; Short, 1986). These groups consist of four or five students, and they last from two days to a week. The primary purpose of Literature Circles is to discuss literature in ways that help children think deeply about a book so that it

becomes an important part of their life. For Literature Circles to function successfully, students must have daily opportunities to read a variety of materials. They also need a teacher who supports risk taking and who encourages different interpretations of text.

Initially, the teacher either selects several works of literature or encourages students to select materials independently. He or she may also work cooperatively with students in choosing books. These resources are introduced to the whole class through short book talks or, for young children, may be read aloud. Then, the books are made available for student browsing. Children decide whether or not they want to join a Literature Circle, and, if so, they choose a specific group based on their literary interest. The teacher helps to form the groups. Afterward, children read their book and discuss it in their Literature Circle. Some may read the literature before meeting with the group, especially if they are reading longer chapter books. For children who are unable to read on their own, the teacher can read the book aloud and then place a tape recording of it in the listening center. Students also have the option of reading their piece of literature as they discuss it. For example, the group can meet daily to discuss the section of the book that was read the previous day and to decide cooperatively what to read for the next group meeting. To facilitate the discussion process, the teacher may ask broad questions, such as

"What is this story about?" The teacher also may encourage the group to "Talk about this book while I listen." When the book is completed, the group engages in an intensive discussion of the whole piece of literature and also considers presenting the piece to the entire class.

Literature Circles tend to work effectively when about half the class is involved in them at a single time. Meanwhile, the other children are reading independently, are writing in their literature logs, or are doing other language immersion activities. Although the teacher serves as a leader or member, he or she should release this responsibility to students as they demonstrate an understanding of how the Literature Circles operate. More discussion of these worthwhile group sessions is found in Harste, Shorte, and Burke (1988). In addition, the teacher may consider a variation of Literature Circles, including the Literature Group (Peterson, 1987) and the Shared Book Experience (Holdaway, 1979; Watson & Crowley, 1988).

Skill Groups

Although a literature based approach is an important part of a language arts program, some children need specific support as they are learning to read. Skill groups are one way of helping these individuals achieve a sense of proficiency. The necessary considerations are that skill groups be organized for children in need, that they last only until the need is met, that they focus on high frequency/utility generalizations, and that they be linked

to a meaningful context.

Trachtenburg (1990) provides such a context which unites phonics instruction and quality children's literature. In this instructional plan, students experience a whole-part-whole sequence. In Step 1 (whole), the classroom teacher reads aloud a quality piece of children's literature while modeling expressive oral reading and highlighting the enjoyment of a delightful story. Children also become involved in extension activities, such as dramatization, while the teacher rereads the story.

In Step 2 (part), the teacher might guide the group with instruction in short a by linking it to the preceding story. At first, he or she explains and models by saying, "Today you will learn one sound that the letter a may stand for. This will help you read many more words that contain the letter a." Then, the teacher places on the chalkboard part of the story that has examples of short a. As the teacher reads this story part, he or she underlines the short a words and says, "The sound I hear when I come to each underlined letter a is /a/. Read this part of the story with me slowly and listen for the /a/ sound." The children and teacher can reread this part of the story a number of times until the children understand the short a letter-sound correspondence. For guided practice, students can apply their knowledge of short a in larger language units by using a sentence slotter.

In Step 3 (whole), the classroom teacher introduces a new

book that has examples of short a in context. Children therefore have the opportunity to connect their knowledge of decoding with the new application story. This connection may help capable readers to read independently. Less skilled readers can experience fluency from choral reading of the application story in enlarged text (for example, a big book format) (Trachtenburg & Ferruggia, 1989). "Regardless of the ability level, all students have the opportunity in Step 3 to apply the newly learned skill in a whole, rich, familiar context as they connect reading skill instruction with storybook reading" (Trachtenburg, 1990, p. 651).

While linking skills to authentic reading materials is a legitimate activity, a caution is needed. Regrettably, certain teachers may overdo the skill group component of the language arts program, and this unnecessary stress on skill development could negate the whole language philosophy. As important, too many skill disruptions will probably hinder the natural flow of language as well as efforts to develop reading fluency. This situation could generate a limited view that learning to read is a matter of decoding words rather than of constructing meaning.

Strategy Groups

As with skill development, there are a variety of instructional strategies that can be applied to meaningful text. Strategies are especially worthwhile if they help readers become more proficient as they construct meaning. Children who are

successful readers use different strategies, depending on the context of situation and the context of text (Watson & Crowley 1988).

ERRQ (Estimate, Read, Respond, Question) supports reluctant readers in personalizing their reading and in committing themselves to a text. This approach can be applied to a strategy group with the purpose of helping the children feel successful. According to Watson and Crowley (1988), "By assisting readers in monitoring their pace and comprehension, this activity offers these readers an opportunity to prove to themselves that they do indeed have linguistic strengths and control of the reading process"(p. 265).

In learning ERRQ, readers are initially concerned with estimating how much text they can read with meaning in a specific period of time. After they check this point or "stake their claim," they begin to read. Since the children have made a personal decision about the amount of text to be completed, they are intrinsically motivated to fulfill this task. When they accomplish the task, they respond by indicating briefly how the story relates to their life and literary experiences, for example, their reaction to a character or how they feel about being in a similiar situation. Then, students ask a question that may stimulate a group discussion or a written dialogue concerning the story. The question could reflect a lack of understanding or could extend meaning beyond the text. ERRQ supports a unique transaction between children (with their personal backgrounds)

and the author's writing (with its ideas and rhetorical devices).

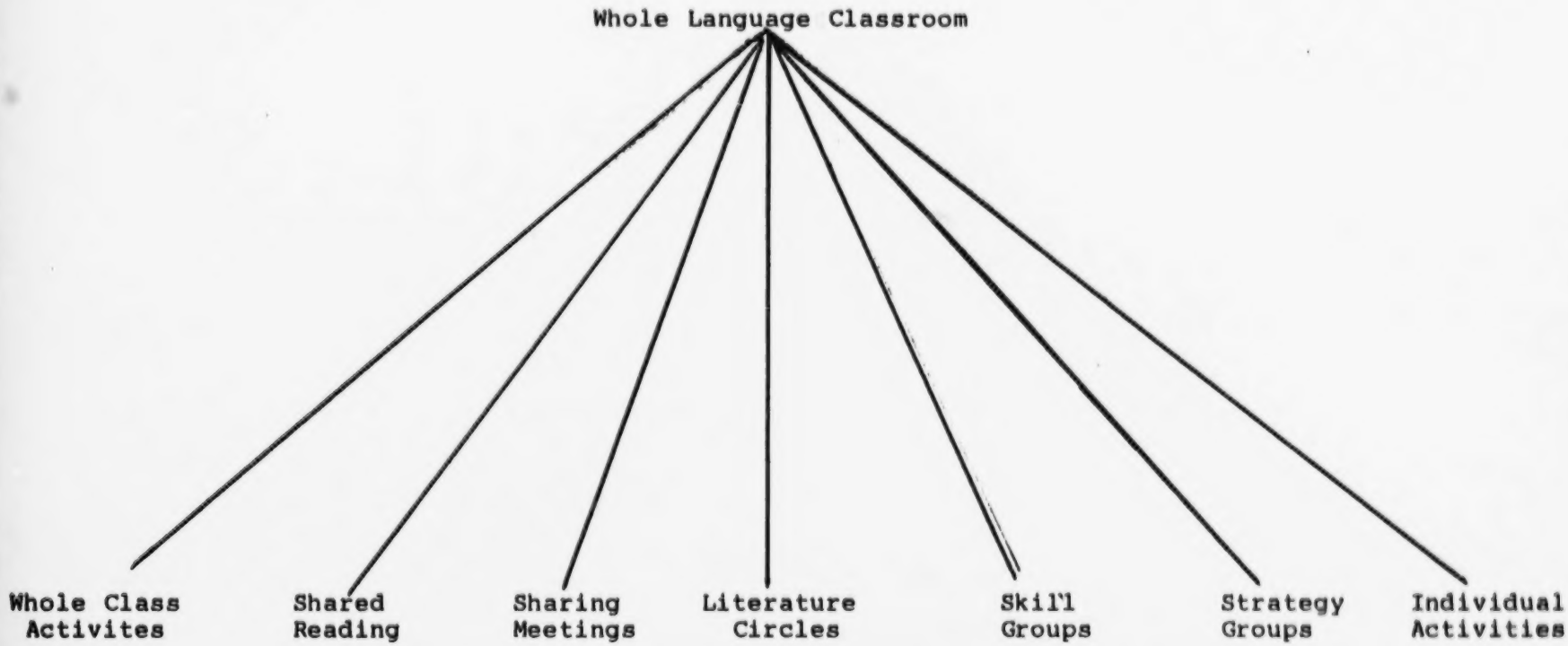
In addition to ERRQ, strategy groups are effective in helping children understand and apply other instructional strategies. For example, Robinson's (1962) SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review) or Thomas and Robinson's (1977) PQ4R (Preview, Question, Read, Reflect, Recite, and Review) or a variation of these and other strategies could be especially helpful for students who are attempting to independently understand and remember pertinent expository text. Teachers should encourage different strategies in small group settings so that children can feel successful when reading and studying different text structures.

Summary

Whole language educators are apparently so dissatisfied with the intra-class three group plan that they may be avoiding most small group patterns. Interestingly, ability grouping by itself is not the issue, but long-term ability grouping does cause problems (Allington, 1983; Hiebert, 1983). The challenge to whole language teachers is to organize a variety of groups, including Shared Reading, Sharing Meetings, Literature Circles, skill groups, and strategy groups. These patterns provide children with flexibility while they prevent the self-fulfilling prophecy "once a problem reader, always a problem reader." They also complement other ways of organizing instruction, including whole class and

individual activities. Unless varied grouping is incorporated into classrooms, the whole language movement may never demonstrate its full potential for helping children grow as readers and writers.

Considerations for Organizing Whole Language Instruction



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